

# Lounger's Miscellany.

## NUMBER II.

SATURDAY, JUNE 7th, 1788.

*Fœnum habet in cornu, &c.* — HOR.

**EVERY** MAN is, or suspects himself to be, at some one time or other, a Wit. The gravity of Cato was more than once known to relax itself; and he who was never provoked to smile by another's joke, has sometimes ventured to become a joker himself. Without entering into those discriminations which, indeed, are not very nice between a wit and a joker, I shall proceed to give some little account of the various methods by which the name, title and dignity of a wit may be sought for and acquired. According to the common acceptance of his title, a wit is one who raises a laugh at his own or his neighbour's expence; what he says while he supports that character is either foolish or severe.

HE is continually therefore in what the Logicians call a dilemma, in the one case contemptible, in the other odious. If he exposes himself, we laugh at him; if he exposes another, he has made an enemy who thirsts for revenge. Happily, however, there are more of the former species of wits than of the latter, by as much as it is more easy to be ridiculous than terrible. The number is not very small of those, who without buffoonery enough

to raise an hearty laugh even against themselves, and without power to expose by successful raillery the failings or the follies of others, have the misfortune to support no character—They are droll, and no laughter is excited; they exercise their wit, and no wounds are inflicted—“*telum imbellis sine ictu.*”—Upon this race of bipeds the courtesy of the world has bestowed the title of *small wits*.

THERE are few things whose frequency of occurrence gives greater disgust to common sense, or more repeated shocks to common decency, than the conversation of the small wits. It is their peculiar property to be trifling in their remarks, and troublesome in their loquacity. Yet these are amongst their most venial faults, because conversation calls for remarks, and loquacity is frequently produced by the officious spirit of mistaken politeness. He therefore who makes a trifling observation only because it is his turn to say something, merits forgiveness, though he cannot demand attention; and he who is loquacious only that he may be polite, will meet with no acrimony of reproof, except from petulance. The end he has in view is a good one, though the means he uses to attain it are little likely to be successful. A small wit, and what is called a pettifogging Attorney begin the world with about an equal stock, the one of understanding, the other of honesty. The former must not be actually proved a fool, nor must the latter be positively convicted a knave. A short intercourse with the world discovers the compass of their abilities and integrity; and every one believes what no one thinks it necessary deliberately to demonstrate, that this is a fool, and that a knave. An Attorney of this class cannot afford to pass by any opportunity, which chance or good company may throw in his way, of vending a skin of parchment, and touching a fix and eight-pence.—He cordially fomenta a quarrel, that he may be called officially to settle it—He assumes an insolence of behaviour that he may provoke an assault, of which he has already calculated the profits. It is the summit of his wishes to have his bones broken, in which, whenever he is so fortunate as to succeed, he looks forward with joy and alacrity to his recovery—of damages. Thus too it is with this species of wit: the poverty of his

resources



resources obliges him to seize upon every occasion which offers itself of displaying to the best advantage his miserable and scanty pittance.—He prattles scandal with the volubility of a magpie, and is content to be convicted of a falsehood, if his lye be allowed to have the semblance of a witticism. When he attempts the most sublime pitch his genius is capable of attaining, he is obscene or blasphemous. From the overthrow of modesty he brings sufficient trophies to testify that he is a wit, and to prove the same position, the lucky quotation of some scriptural passage bears ample testimony.

MR. WILLIAM SIMPER of Lincoln's Inn, Gent. is a wit of this order.—Mr. Simper is allowed to possess that talent which with the vulgar usually passes for wisdom of having something to say upon all subjects. To any one who should observe this Gentleman at a small distance, it would appear as if he were ever surrounded by all those blessings which rarely fall to one man's share—“*renidet usquequaque.*” Mirth, conviviality, repartee, and ten thousand other whimsical spirits, to which the inhabitants of this world at least give honour due, you would swear were his inseparable companions. The smile of complacency which plays upon his lips, should seem to denote his own good humour; and the repeated volleys of his laughter, the wit of his company. Approach, however, near enough to this son of Mercury to have a distinct view of him, and you will find the smile of complacency discovers nothing but the whiteness of his teeth, and that his company have their full share of glory, when they are allowed to be “as witty as their neighbours:” to a reasonable man, his mirth, being noisy and irrational, will be insipid, and to a decent one, his conviviality and his repartee will be disgusting and shocking.

I HAVE sometimes had occasion to observe that the talent of a wit is as manageable as the voice of a ventriloquist, which may be conveyed, as inclination or occasion may require, to the head, the hand or the foot. It is not long ago since I had the happiness to fall into a company of manual wits, where, while my attention was engaged



in observing the archness of a Gentleman on my left hand, who had metamorphosed himself into a wit, by turning the hinder part of his wig before, and twisting his fingers into the form of a snuff box, my right hand neighbour with infinite humour and dexterity twitched my chair from under me, and to the great satisfaction of the company, my head came with considerable violence to the ground. I was amply recompensed for whatever pain I might have suffered in the fall, by the salutations of the company when I rose, who testified the mirth which I had the good fortune to create, by vociferous and repeated huzzas. The great inconvenience of spending one's time in such company is, that they are never at a loss for this species of humour while they have the use of their limbs. A good hale fellow will overturn a whole company, nor can you ever get the better of him in this manual exercise of wit, till you have dislocated his shoulder or blinded both his eyes. At the head of this society is Mr. Hercules Armstrong, who is indebted to his unrivalled prowess for his elevated station, he having in the space of three years and four months fractured the skulls of the whole club in argument, besides occasional dislocations and broken ribs, with no other inconvenience to himself than having lost the use of his right arm by the raillery of the Vice-President, and suffered a twist of the ankle-bone in a skirmish with a junior member: the state of this Gentleman's probation might not improperly be called the Labours of Hercules. To be present at the keen encounter of their wits is like being at a pantomime, where you are obliged to collect the meaning of each actor from his grimace. Upon a near examination however of their modes of attack and defence, I could not help taking notice, that the same forms are observed in establishing an argument in the school of boxing, as in the school of logic; and that the tactics of Mendoza are established upon the same principles as the logic of Aristotle. In both they call in the aid of the *jocus amarus* or sarcasm—the Socratic argument, called by the Greeks *αντιστροφον*, by the Latins *reciprocum*, and in English the *Jack of both sides*: then comes the *reductio ad absurdum*, the sorites, and the figure irony, &c.—The *jocus amarus* or sarcasm, in boxing, is when any one plants a blow successfully, accompanying the same with a sly smile directed to the spectators,

spectators, or the rolling up his tongue to one side of his mouth. The Socratic argument is used with equal success on either side. It was invented by Protagoras of Abdera, and may be called *giving a man as good as he brings*. It is the Socratic mode, when any one having received a blow immediately returns the same before his antagonist can have recovered his guard. The *reductio ad absurdum* is, when any one, against whom a violent blow is directed, flips out of the way, in which case the other is brought to the ground by the weight of his own arguments. The *sortes* is, when any one follows up a well planted blow by a variety of others, and thus overwhelms his adversary, by accumulated propositions.—The figure irony is, when any one makes a feint to aim at his enemy's head, instead of which, tripping up his heels, he overturns his position and puts an end to the contest.

BUT enough perhaps has been said of these wits who have their talent at their fingers ends, to prove that they may be very good company when they have muffles on, or when their friends are accommodated with coats of mail; but without such security for their good behaviour, we his Majesty's loyal subjects are every day liable to be bantered out of the use of our limbs, argued out of our eye-sight, and obliged to complain with Falstaff, that "villainous "witty company has been the ruin of us."

THERE are yet a few other orders of wits, not less troublesome, though less terrible than the foregoing. I mean those who appear to have a list of jokes for every day in the year; a table of witticisms for the first of April, the Ides of May, Michaelmas-goose-tide, and all other festivals, fixed and moveable. Some too there are who tell long witty stories, in which themselves are the principal agents; to these I have frequently wished to relate, in hopes they might profit by it, the following short anecdote of Druso the Usurer of Rome. This ingenious Gentleman lent much money, and told many stories: such, however, was the peculiar infelicity of his oratorical talents, that he could seldom keep up the attention of his audience till his story was concluded.—Happily however he hit upon

upon this expedient. He fixed particular days, on which he summoned all those to whom he had lent money to appear, when they who were unable to answer his pecuniary demands were obliged by way of penalty to pay attention to his story.—By these means he held an attentive and numerous audience by the ears, either till their sufferings excited his compassion, or his budget of tales was exhausted.

To all long-winded story-telling wits I would recommend, that before they begin to indulge themselves in trespassing upon the time and patience of their company, they should look round the room, in order to ascertain whether there be any one upon whom they have a just claim.—If such there be, they have a right to seize him by the button; nor need they think of dismissing him, either till he hath paid the uttermost farthing, or till, like the two swains in the first *Æclogue* of Virgil, the approach of evening puts an end to their conference.

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